New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1948

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NEW YORK DAILY NEWS · NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES · NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK SUN · NEW YORK STAR · NEW YORK POST

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"Hilarities"

New York Post

SEPTEMBER 10, 1948

Are You Really Longing For a Vaudeville Show?

By RICHARD WATTS JR.

As the sagacious Jimmy Cannon pointed out recently, there is a lot of romantic nonsense being spouted about vaudeville these days by lachrymose ancients, who mourn the past glories of that moribund art form. Actually vaudeville, while it had the great merit of providing a fine training ground for comedians, suffered its mortal wounds because its acts were so much more often bad than good. In it the meritorious and the boring were mingled in considerable confusion, with the total amusement value of a variety show usually adding up to less than the sum of its individual numbers.

If you want to know how sincere you are in lamenting the decline of variety, you will find a proper test in the helter-skelter carnival called "Hilarities," which was thrown together on the stage of the Adelphi Theatre last night. In it the good and the bad acts are scattered in just about the proportions that vaudeville used to achieve. If you can say honestly that the resulting entertainment is a satisfactory one, then there is no doubt of your loyalty to vaudeville tradition. Being only a medium-sized enthusiast for the old two-a-day, I must confess that I was happy only in spots.

Morey Amsterdam

Although my acquaintance with the radio is decidedly limited, I have listened with pleasure on a number of occasions to an amiable wireless clown named Morey Amsterdam. It is this same Mr. Amsterdam who is all mixed up in "Hilarities," as master of ceremonies, informal comedian and man of all work. He is, I suspect, happier over the air waves than on the stage, but he is a pleasant chatterer, who is at his best when introducing the other numbers by noting, for example, that "the next act needs no introduction, because the fellows in it have known each other for years."

Some of Mr. Amsterdam's material is carelessly chosen so far as both taste and comedy go, but he is one of the virtues of "Hilarities" and gives evidence of being a comedian on the way up. There are other agreeable contributors to a show which at least gets better as it goes along. High among them are the veteran Calgary Brothers, with their wonderfully insane drunken pantomime, and Gil Maison, who has an exceptionally likeable animal act, including a huge dog of an independent turn of mind and an ape that jitterbugs and gets violent when Frank Buck's name is mentioned.

The Magician

Having been scared by a magician at an early age, I am not an enthusiast for their art, but the agreeable Egyptian called Gali Gali strikes me as one of the most engaging of his profession. There is a nice, long-legged Negro girl named Enid Williams, who burlesques torch songs with dead-pan boredom, and is something of a personality. The Holloway Sisters are pretty tap dancers, with an agreeable freshness about them, and, if you can stand feminine trapeze acts, the Herzogs have a good one.

But, in characteristic vaudeville fashion, there are long, dull stretches and a number of acts, which, so far as I am concerned, are intermission. In this hapless category, I am afraid I must place George Tapps, who is a sort of poor man's Gene Kelly and very pretentious about it, and the industrious Connie Sawyer, who sings about statistics and the state of Oklahoma. Anyway, here is vaudeville, and neither the best nor the worst of its kind, but a quite typical effort. It has its points, but it is my fear that there are not quite enough of them.

'HILARITIES.'

HILARITIES, a vaudeville show conceived by Ken Robey and supervised by Mervyn Nelson. Music and lyrics by Buddy Kaye, Stanley Arnold and Carl Lampl; sketches by Sidney Zelinka, Howard Harris and Morey Amsterdam; dances arranged by George Tapps; scenes by Crayon; special musical arrangements by Elliot Jacoby; musical direction by Ruby Zwerling; presented by Mr. Robey and Stan Zucker. At the Adelphi Theatre.

Company—Mr. Amsterdam, Betty Jane Watson, Mr. Tapps, Connie Sawyer, Larry Douglas, Raul and Eva Reyes, Gali Gali, Gerald Austen, Al Kelly, Sid Stone, The Calgarys, Nancy Andrews, Maizone and the Abbott Dancers, Holloway Sisters, Harold and Lola, the Herzogs, Enid Williams, Connie Stevens and Mital Norvelle.

New York World-Telegram

SEPTEMBER 10, 1948

'Hilarities' Hits A Few High Spots

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

The "Hilarities" which opened last night is a different form of entertainment, but not one that is likely to set a fashion.

This sprawling variety is really a vaudeville bill presented with the informality and shapelessness of a really screwy night club show. There are some first rate acts and some ordinary ones, but most definitely there are too many of them.

No self-respecting vaudeville booker would be caught dead with the order of entertainment here. The best entertainment is at the beginning and the end, while the middle sags woefully.

Plenty of Talent.

It is interesting that what resembles standard vaudeville acts (some of them were) are most effective, and odd that the animals and acrobats got the biggest hands of the evening.

Admittedly this sounds doleful, but there is plenty of talent for a sound show, and particularly at a $2.40 week-night top. What is needs is smart routining, cutting and pacing.

Morey Amsterdam, who stars and m. c.'s the performance, has been a highly successful comedian in clubs, radio and television. You would never know it from "Hilarities," for which he seems to have provided himself with the dullest material of the cast.

The cast around him combines people of highly professional caliber with others who perform as if their previous peak had been regional conventions.

A Sinuous Adagio.

After starting like a recalcitrant steam engine, the show hits speed with a sinuous adagio by Harold and Lola in which the girl aptly coils herself as a snake about her twirling partner. They are followed by Gali Gali's well-known sleight of hand, done with a rapidity that never fails to startle.

Somewhere along about here in the program there turns up a lanky Negro girl called Enid Williams, undoubtedly the deadest pan singer and dancer on record. She has promise but needs experience to point up her style.

The same thing is true of Connie Sawyer, who has a comic talent still undefined in a weird method of using four or five different styles of humor in one line of a song.

There is a sure-fire boost to the show's progress in the Calgary Brothers' slow motion drunk pantomime, an act that stands out like a polished gem in comparison to the uncertainty of some of the others.

George Tapps with his dancing, and Sid Stone's pitchman act are reliable quantities, familiar in their fields.

Stellar Trapeze Act.

The Herzogs do a trapeze act which rates being placed so near the end of the bill. One member of the troupe, a stooge ostensibly from the audience, persists in performing in high heels and a long skirt while hanging on to a pocketbook. The results are equally amusing and breathtaking.

Pulling up toward the finish is Gil Maison's animal act, fast, fresh and one of the best of its kind. Between a white Saint Bernard with a punch drunk disposition, and a monkey who jitterbugs, Maison is a literal fall guy for laughs. Raul and Eva Reyes, with their perpetual motion Latin stepping, offer an expert routine for the formal closing.

Scattered through the program are songs by Betty Jane Watson, Larry Douglas, Gerald Austen and Nancy Andrews, and routines by the Holloway Sisters who look and dance like the McCarthy Sisters of Scandals days.

An unpretentious show, with a potential of entertaining a lot of people, "Hilarities" stands badly in need of a firm and ruthless hand to remold it from start to finish.

DAILY NEWS

SEPTEMBER 10, 1948

'Hilarities' Opens at the Adelphi

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Morey Amsterdam and a hard-working band of followers made the newest attempt to revive vaudeville last evening, presenting for the edification, rumination and regurgitation of a friendly audience a show heroically titled "Hilarities."

Once in a while somebody tries to revive vaudeville, which was in its time a useful form of entertainment and still could be. Vaudeville is, of course, dead. Sentimental columnists frequently wonder in print what killed it—but nobody except me right now has advanced the theory that it committed suicide."

Mr. Amsterdam is a roundish, shortish man with a rubber face, big blue eyes and an expansive shrug. He can tell a good joke, but he hasn't quite divined the difference between a good one and a bad one, or a clean one and a dirty one. His best last night was about a wife who tracked her husband to a bar one 4 A. M., ordered from the bartender whatever it was her mate was drinking and funneled a triple slug of liquor. She gasped, "How can you drink that awful stuff?" He answered, "See? You think I'm going around having a good time every night."

They All Tried.

Well, to get back to "Hilarities" and vaudeville:

The entertainers at the Adelphi are all generous and good natured. Harold and Lola do their familiar snake dance, with Lola in a snake suit slithering all over Harold. Gali Gali, gray-haired now, performs his magical miracles with cups, corks and live chicks. George Tapps does some nice tap-and-ballet dancing, and a cute pair of girls named the Holloway sisters also do a pleasing tap routine.

Among the singers there are Betty Jane Watson, a girl from "Oklahoma!" who sings stuff straight, and Enid Williams, a tall, handsome and dark girl who sings torch songs with a dead pan and is quite funny. Also there is a blonde who sings tough stuff in a raspy voice and thinks she is funny but isn't.

The Autopsy.

That is why vaudeville committed suicide, I believe. It thought it would be funny by being tough; it hoped that an innuendo would be as good as a joke. For instance, last evening Mr. Amsterdam permitted himself to appear in a song which had no taste whatever and even less wit. Modern vaudevillians lack judgment.

I hope, for the sake of the many performers involved, that "Hilarities" is a hit at the Adelphi and that it will revive vaudeville. But my guess is that vaudeville still is in its grave, tossing fitfully. Tossing fitfully, too, must be Keith and Beck and Albee and even Pantages, not to mention some of their employes like Nazimova, Bernhardt, Willie Collier, Jim Thornton, Nat Wills, Herb Williams, Sam Bernard, William Gillette and Bert Williams.

The Sun

SEPTEMBER 10, 1948

By WARD MOREHOUSE

A Forlorn Variety Show.

If vaudeville wasn't dead at the Adelphi last night it was certainly half-dead as Morey Amsterdam's "Hilarities" went through the motions of being a variety show.

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There are no tramp jugglers on the bill, but there's nearly everything else, and most of it is definitely mediocre.

"Hilarities" is poky and haphazard. Morey Amsterdam ambles through the proceedings and he is a comedian who will hardly enchant you. He introduces some of the acts, tells a few jokes and stories, drags on a cello, goes in for snatches of monologue, and succeeds in reminding you just how expert such a man as Hank Ladd is at this sort of thing.

The Adelphi's bill offers some dreary interludes, but it also has a redeeming number here and there. The Egyptian magician, Gali Gali, with his baby chickens and corks and brass cups, is a fascinating trickster. The Calgary Brothers, lugubrious and collapsible, are amusing fellows, and Gil Maison's menagerie number is an excellent act.

The tall precisionist, George Tapps, is around to give his familiar dancing routines. Sid Stone has several minutes of quacking in his pitchman specialty. The Holloway Sisters dance, Betty Jane Watson sings and so does Connie Sawyer without stopping the show.

"Hilarities" might have seemed better last night if it had been skillfully organized. Judging it on the basis of its first performance, it is straggling and badly integrated. More showmanship is needed if they're to save the pieces. Actually, this new show at the Adelphi is a vaudeville hodgepodge without pretensions and without merit—save in a few numbers.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

SEPTEMBER 10, 1948

= By HOWARD BARNES =

Morey Vaudeville

THERE is an amiable and unpretentious quality about "Hilarities" which keeps it from being a downright bore. The new Adelphi offering pretends to be nothing more than a vaudeville show. It mixes hoofers, trapeze artists, singers, magicians and pantomimists in a helter-skelter array of talent. Some special songs have been written for the proceedings, and several jokesters have imagined that they composed sketches for this Ken Robey-Stan Zucker production. It is never, in any sense, a revue. The Calgary Brothers contribute the brightest interlude in the piece. It is the same act which has been around the night clubs for a couple of decades.

• • •

The addition of a master of ceremonies seems to be the only difference between the old two-a-day and variety in a legitimate theater. In the present instance Morey Amsterdam handles the assignment, introducing turns and sometimes failing to do so, delivering quips and sawing away at a cello briefly. He is not the most engaging of ring masters. Much of his comedy is forced; much of it is merely dull. Individual exploits are the stock in trade of "Hilarities." They vary exceedingly in entertainment voltage.

• • •

The bistro atmosphere is very evident when Gali Gali goes to work, except that there are no tinkling glasses at the Adelphi to accompany his prestidigitation. With a couple of hapless helpers from the audience, he makes money appear and disappear, pulls baby chicks out of pants pockets and demonstrates with the old shell and pea game that the hand is faster than the eye. At the other end of the scale is Betty Jane Watson, singing straight and pleasantly. George Tapps clicks out rhythms with a great welcome for himself and the Herzogs whip around ropes and trapezes with the greatest of ease.

• • •

A fresh and dynamic performer is disclosed at the Adelphi in Enid Williams, a Negro singer with enough personality to make up for an indifferent voice. Harald and Lola do a snake dance, Connie Sawyer has some brash moments as a diseuse and the Holloway Sisters tap it out in unison in one scene. The Calgary Brothers remain the class of the show. Their "Lost Weekend" number is still funny and wonderful even to one who has seen it a dozen times. "Hilarities" is a catch as catch can entertainment with not enough worth catching.

The New York Times

SEPTEMBER 10, 1948

Vaudeville Grave Whirling

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Since Morey Amsterdam is starred in Morey Amsterdam's "Hilarities," and since Morey Amsterdam has written some of the sketches, there is quite a lot of Morey Amsterdam in the rickety vaudeville show which opened at the Adelphi last evening. Even a little of Morey Amsterdam would be quite a lot in the happiest circumstances. For he is a mediocre wag with tiresome persistence who makes very little compensation for the time he takes up behind the footlights. When he is behind the footlights he is not clowning on the radio. That at least helps to limit the field.

In the split seconds when Morey Amsterdam steps outside to consult his writers, one or two genuine vaudeville acts get an opportunity to make direct contact with the audience. Gali Gali, the guilygully man, is a superb magician with a fine sense of enjoyment, and should never be without a booking. And the knockabout team of the Calgary Brothers is honestly hilarious in the high tradition of low comedy. They move, which is a real contribution to the theatre.

"Hilarities"—so-called in the program—overemphasizes the more monotonous aspects of vaudeville. "Program subject to change at the Saturday 8:30 performance," according to a line on the bill. Not a bad idea and none too soon, considering the condition of the country.

Daily Mirror

SEPTEMBER 10, 1948

Vaudeville Not Yet Back at Adelphi

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Ken Robey and Stan Zucker sought to bring back vaudeville last evening with Morey Amsterdam's "Hilarities" at the Adelphi Theatre, and it is our unpleasant duty to report this morning that vaudeville still remains to be brought back. "Hilarities," unfortunately, is not hilarious and not very entertaining.

Amsterdam has a nice personality and knows how to capitalize on a gag, but, alas, his writers haven't given him the proper material to work with. Most of his gags are vintage and fall to the stage with a dull thud. There are some excellent variety acts in the shindy, but a majority of them are spotted in the second act and badly presented.

By the time the top acts got on, many of the first-nighters and critics had departed. They missed the Calgary Brothers, an amusing acrobatic comedy team; Gil Maison, a very funny fellow, harassed by a menagerie of blase animals, and the Herzogs, a good trapese act using the good old Pete Jackson stooge formula to good advantage.

For those who like George Tapps, there is plenty of George Tapps in the second stanza. Tapps blends Spanish and tap dancing into a hybrid style which, though it doesn't always please this buck-and-wing addict, seems to be sure fire with the average customer. Sid Stone offers a solid pitchman routine.

The best bet in the first half is Gali Gali, a clever magician.

Betty Jane Watson and Larry Douglas handle the vocal assignments creditably. We recommend Miss Watson to operetta impresarios in search of a promising prima donna. Harold and Lola offer a snake adagio routine, the Holloway sisters a pleasing tap turn and Enid Williams a commentary on Virginia O'Brien's deadpan songstress stint.

In sum, Amsterdam's "Hilarities" has the makings of a good vaudeville show, but they haven't been jelled into a satisfactory two-a-dayer.

***NEW YORK* STAR**

September 12, 1948

Two-a-Day Returns: Few Hits, Many Duds

By JOHN LARDNER

It's impossible to advertise a no-hit ball game in advance, so that on Thursday night quite a number of burghers and their wives passed up the Polo Grounds, where Rex Barney was paralyzing the N. Y. Giants, and settled for Morey Amsterdam's *Hilarities*, a variety show which infiltrated the Adelphi Theater the same evening and coincided minute for minute with Mr. Barney's heroic chore.

To do him justice, comrade Amsterdam tried his best to make it up to the customers. He yielded very few hits. But in a vaudeville show with twenty-odd numbers, the percentage is pretty strong against a perfect score, good or bad. Amsterdam lost his no-hitter when the Calgary Brothers, Andre and Steve, connected for two bases toward the end of the fourth inning with their acrobatic drunk act. Other, scratchier bingles were scored by the following:

* * *

Enid Williams, a tall girl with a dead pan who kids love songs and looks like Joe Louis.

Al Kelly, a double-talker. If such a thing can be said about double-talking, and I don't quite see how it can, Mr. Kelly was better than his material.

Gali Gali, a magician with a quick pair of dukes and a fez.

On the other hand, most of the boys and girls in the lineup went for the horse-collar, like the Giants. Among those going hitless all night were George Tapps, a minority group who considers himself the best hoofer in the world; Connie Sawyer, a chanteuse or diseuse who hits with one foot in the water-bucket; and Sid Stone, who is working as fast as he can to kill the old pitchman's routine made glorious fifteen years ago by Clyde Harger.

* * *

Well, wait a minute. You can credit Mr. Stone with a glancing hit if you score very liberally. While demonstrating a patent potato-peeler on the stage on opening night, he sent a piece of spud on a low, blooping line toward the drama critic of the *Daily Mirror*, who failed to field it clearly. That was the big moment of the evening on our side of the stands.

As for Mr. Amsterdam himself, I have got to judge him with reservations. He is a class B master of ceremonies and a class C comedian, but there lingers about him an old familiar vaudeville perfume, half cheese and half good will, which has a kind of nostalgic value for me. I find that some of the ancient throw-away gags are still perversely funny. "These people need no introduction. They know each other very well already." And "Please stand a little closer to the floor."

I hadn't heard these in seventeen years. One or two younger members of the audience hadn't heard them at all, and, to their confusion, were caught laughing out loud. Such are the mysteries of time and space. In acknowledgment of his work as a resurrectionist, I present Mr. Amsterdam free with a line from somewhere else, which is one of the silliest I can remember and always makes me laugh when my resistance is low: "Run for the roundhouse, Nellie, the brakeman can't corner you there."

* * *

By way of footnote, I'd like to say that *Hilarities* demonstrates that, whatever it was that killed vaudeville, it wasn't radio. Not radio comedy, anyway. I heard Mr. Amsterdam on a radio show last month. He was far, far worse than he is in person. Maybe the explanation lies in the laws of chivalry and fair play. An actor who does his stuff in person, out there on a stage, is open to physical reprisals, and is therefore a braver and more sympathetic figure than the guy who sulks behind a microphone.

P.S. I will give my thanks and one beer on the house to any reader who can supply all the words of the old song, *Saloon, Saloon, Saloon*. Mr. Amsterdam sings a few of them in *Hilarities*, but fills in the gaps with second-rate patter.

Journal American

SEPTEMBER 10, 1948

It's All Morey's and He's Welcome to It

By ROBERT GARLAND

Although Morey Amsterdam has been woefully misinformed as to the true meaning of "Hilarities," it's most certainly his vaudeville show which came last night into the great open spaces of the Adelphi. Programs, both souvenir, which set you back a quarter, and regular, which are give-aways, see that you make no mistake about it.

In the free ones, Mr. Amsterdam's name is mentioned at least nine times. And in large black type, too! As owner of "Hilarities." As star of "Hilarities". As host of "Hilarities". As sketch-writer of "Hilarities". As cellist of "Hilarities." And as co-performer in six of the twenty episodes of which "Hilarities" is composed.

In the souvenir ones, which are profusely illustrated, Mr. Amsterdam is pictured with himself, his wife, his son, his typewriter, his cello, his microphone, Johnny Johnson, Frances Langford, The Pied Pipers, Carmen Cavallero, Barry Gray, Gene Tierney, Milton Berle, Ann Sheridan, Tony Romano, Jimmy Durante and as Queen For a Day.

"Hilarities," whether hilarious or not, is Morey Amsterdam's vaudeville show all right. For the most part, he's welcome to it. Quite obviously, Mr. Amsterdam likes it a whole lot more than I do.

Good in Spots

It seems to have been someone's belief, Mr. Amsterdam's, no doubt, that an East Coast replica of the West Coast "Blackouts" now in its 324th consecutive week in Hollywood, would be a grand idea. It would! The hitch is that Morey Amsterdam isn't Ken Murray and that Mr. Amsterdam's "Hilarities" isn't as good a show.

Frankly, his "Hilarities" isn't a good show, period! Along with the bishop's egg, it's good in spots. But those spots are very few and very far between. And Mr. Amsterdam, himself, doesn't happen to be one of them. His humor is night-club humor, I suppose. As such, it just isn't for a theatregoer such as I.

Like the dinner-jacket Mr. Amsterdam affects during the first half of the evening, the tailoring is unattractive and on the scot suit side. But, again like the Amsterdam wardrobe, it does get a little better as it goes along. But not too much so. Enid Williams and George Tapps, the West Side Paul Draper, are the best of it.

Which goes to prove that the rumor of vaudeville's death is ill-founded. In the face of Morey Amsterdam's "Hilarities," I'm sorry. P. S. First-nighters who remained applauded.

"Sundown Beach"

DAILY NEWS

SEPTEMBER 8, 1948

Actors Studio Makes Bow With 'Sundown Beach,' a Diffuse Play

By JOHN CHAPMAN

In Hollywood the film librarians, cutters and laboratory printers are fond of and very expert at putting together an intricate piece of movie called a montage. The montage is a useful dramatic device whereby, with the aid of multiple printing, lap dissolves and some excited music, a lapse of time can be denoted. In this manner I have seen all of World War I fought in sixty seconds and World War II achieved in even less time.

The montage is a useful and interesting device, and so is its legitimate-stage relative, "Sundown Beach," by Bessie Breuer, which opened the new drama season at the Belasco Theatre last evening. Miss Breuer's work is a three-act montage, offering slices of life from an Air Forces hospital for combat crews.

As a device, "Sundown Beach" is useful and interesting. It is the first publicly shown work of the Actors Studio, a high-minded group of players motivated solely by love of the theatre. It shows that actors can act, given a chance. It does not show that Miss Breuer, deft as she is here and there and now and then, can write a sustained and holding drama.

Some Sharp Scenes.

The actors make their points in "Sundown Beach," but the author misses hers. She has written a great number of scenes for 28 actors, some of which are sharp and effective and others of which are banal; but whatever she was driving at eludes me. I can't find her point of view, so there is no point of view for me, either, except to regard "Sundown Beach" as a laboratory exercise for 28 players.

The setting is a cafe near the Air Forces hospital on an island off the Florida Gulf Coast. Here come the actors, mostly mentally strained from too many or too horrible war missions, to drink and talk about themselves and try to forget. Here, too, are some women—waitresses, a wife or two and a WAC.

They all take their turns at big scenes, making love or spurning it. At proper intervals they are feverishly dramatic, and again are comic or tough. The girls love the wrong men and the men love the wrong girls. One of the patients won't accept his sweet and loving wife because she has brought along a fairly new child who is hers but not his. In the last scene he weakens, however; he says, "Come on, you little bastard," to the child, and this seems to be an indication that here is one psychiatric patient who is getting back to normal.

Well Directed.

A prime mover in the Actors Studio is Elia Kazan, one of the most sagacious directors here or in Hollywood, so it is not surprising that under his tutelage a number of the "Sundown Beach" company turn in vivid performances. Phyllis Thaxter is uncommonly alive and attractive as a WAC who knows what she wants and goes and gets him. Julie Harris does nicely in the strupy part of a hillbilly wife who brings along a mistaken child. Warren Stevens, Edward Binns and John Sylvester are stalwarts among the aviators.

"Sundown Beach" isn't successful as a play and I think all of the workers have given it more than it deserves. But at least it is something to be able to see live actors again after a Summer layoff from playgoing.

'SUNDOWN BEACH.'

Play by Bessie Breuer; staged by Elia Kazan; setting by Ben Edwards; lighting by Jean Rosenthal; an Actors Studio production, presented by Louis J. Singer at the Belasco Theater Tuesday evening, September 7, 1948. The cast:

Cecil	Nehemiah Persoff
Marie	Martin Balsam
Hazel	Treva Frazee
Vanilla	Jennifer Howard
Tourist	Ellen Mahar
Helen	Vivian Firko
Pop	Elmer Lehr
Thaddeus Long	Steven Hill
Otis	Don Hanmer
Buster	Joe Sullivan
Grits	Michael Lewin
Nadine	Joan Copeland
Nona	Anne Hagiru
George Washburn	Edward Binns
Arthur Bond	Warren Stevens
Henry	Tom Avera
Ella	Lenka Peterson
Belle	Kathleen Maguire
Nancy	Phyllis Thaxter
Tommy	Joseph Fallon
Ida Mae	Julie Harris
Muriel	Gloria Loachman
Major Paul Walters	John Sylvester
Psychiatric Pilot	Ira Cirker
Sheriff	Robert Simon
First Airforce Pilot	Alex Nicol
Second Airforce Pilot	George Joseph
Lou	Lou Gilbert

SYNOPSIS: The scene of the play is an island off the Gulf Coast of Florida in the spring of 1945, during the last months of the war. The action takes place at "Sundown Cafe," near an air-force hospital for convalescent combat crews. Act I. A Saturday afternoon. Act II. Three weeks later. Act III. Two weeks later

Journal and American

SEPTEMBER 8, 1948

'Sundown Beach' Is No Play at All

By ROBERT GARLAND

The new Broadway season is under way. Beneath the presentation banderole of Louis Singer, it has opened at the Belasco. The opener is "Sundown Beach," a play by Bessie Breuer. In an Actors Studio production, it does everything it can to be better than it is.

Unless you're technical, "Sundown Beach" is no play at all. Concerned with war's bitter backwash, it's a collection of unhappy episodes which fail to get together. In this respect, it resembles Maxwell Anderson's "Truckline Cafe," which made the critics famous.

There's small doubt that Miss Breuer knows of what she's writing. Many of her unhappy episodes are three dimensional. Several are heart-breaking. One or two have melodrama. But each is self-sufficient. And that's where "Sundown Beach" goes wrong.

Set in Florida

The scene is an island off the Gulf Coast of Florida. The year is 1945, during the last months of the war. The action, to borrow a word from the program at the Belasco, takes place at Sundown Cafe, near an Air Force hospital for convalescent combat crews.

With leisure on their hands to eat, drink and make love, or love's men-in-uniform equivalent, the Sundown Beachers have themselves a psychopathic time. And juke box music to suit their every mood. The outcome isn't as effective as is obviously intended.

I'd have been content if Elia Kazan had directed "Sundown Beach" as an entirety. Instead, he pointed up each unhappy episode as if it were a one-act play, ignoring the inactive players, permitting them to stand about as disinterested lookers-on.

Actors Blurred

In a cast of characters made up of Hazel, Helen and Vanilla, Nadine, Nona and Nancy, of Cecil, Merle and Henry, George, Arthur and Tommy, it isn't easy to discover who's who, or why, or wherefore. In "Sundown Beach" it isn't necessary. For the characters are —actorial.

Don Hanmer, as Otis, is less actorial than the others. Warren Stevens is up-and-downy as Arthur. John Sylvester is stagey as a messianic major. The women, save for Julie Harris' Ida Mae out of "Tobacco Road," are nothing extra. But—

The new Broadway season is under way. And, if "Sundown Beach" isn't the opener of my wishes, last night's congregation applauded it more appreciatively than I can. Somehow, it seemed as if the ghost of the old Group Theatre was haunting the Belasco.

The New York Times

SEPTEMBER 8, 1948

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

After eleven months of workshop practice, the Actors Studio has put on its first public production, Bessie Breuer's "Sundown Beach," which opened at the Belasco last evening. There seems to be some jumble of proportions here. For Miss Breuer's play looks like an unfinished practice script, and the performance, under Elia Kazan's direction, is overtrained.

Miss Breuer, heretofore celebrated chiefly for a sententious novel entitled "Memory of Love," is writing about a rag-tail parcel of Air Force men under psychiatric treatment on an island off Florida in 1945. The strain of combat flying has brought about maladjustments in some convalescent fliers who are hanging around an open-air restaurant near an Air Force hospital.

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This is a painful topic worth serious treatment, and Miss Breuer is a conspicuously serious writer. But "Sundown Beach" gives an impression of breathlessness as though it were running very fast to stay in the same place throughout the evening. Although Miss Breuer's Air Force convalescents have many troubles, woman-trouble naturally leads all the rest. Some of her fliers are rejected by women who cannot understand what they have been through. Others are escaping women or squandering themselves on women in desperation.

In the course of a helter-skelter evening "Sundown Beach" turns up a few scenes that are moving and ring true. Miss Breuer has ably contrasted the case of Capt. George Washburn, who needs his wife's compassion, but does not get it, with the case of Sergeant Thaddeus Long, who has it but tries to drive his wife away. Populated chiefly by neurotics, "Sundown Beach" is naturally an overwrought play. But Miss Breuer has not gathered her incidents up into any overwhelming pattern or design. "Sundown Beach" looks like vivid notes for a play that is still to be written.

In all conscience, Mr. Kazan's aggressive direction has not helped it much. The performance is mannered and self-conscious. It is full of violent physical interludes that have no particular meaning. Sometimes it seems to be ignoring the play—so lost in its own inventiveness that it renders the lines unintelligible. Most of the actors are tense and rigid, and strain after effects they do not wholly understand. Perhaps the Actors Studio has been hunting through the scenes of "Sundown Beach" too earnestly to enjoy them.

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There are some good actors in the company and they play some good isolated scenes—Steven Hill and Julie Harris as the married couple from the South, Warren Stevens and Phyllis Thaxter as a couple that will be married very soon. Don Hanmer and Edward Binns as psychiatric derelicts of the Air Force. Ben Edwards has provided a suitable island setting, which Jean Rosenthal has lighted well.

But "Sundown Beach" does not open the new season auspiciously. Perhaps the Actors Studio would have been wiser to keep it to themselves for trial-and-error practicing.

The Sun

SEPTEMBER 8, 1948

By WARD MOREHOUSE

The First Play a Weak One.

I regret beginning the new season on a sour note, but the first play isn't very good. "Sundown Beach," the work of Bessie Breuer, and presented last evening at the Belasco, is earnest and overwritten—a cluttered and congested drama, and a play that remains singularly lifeless all evening notwithstanding the directorial services of Elia Kazan, one of the keenest hands in the theater.

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"Sundown Beach" is Miss Breuer's first play. She is writing of frustrations and the tragedies in the lives of a group of used-up and washed-up combat flyers, and she makes an effort to show how they live and feel after their fighting days are over. But her story is too diffuse, her characters are not developed. There is a great deal of movement on the Belasco's stage but there's very little play.

The author reveals, in her study of the convalescents at an air-force hospital off the Gulf Coast of Florida, that many of the men had psychiatric problems before they went into the service, and she makes the observation that rehabilitation is by no means easy.

In her play—and in Kazan's direction—people are forever wandering aimlessly about and there are several characters seemingly too dangerous to be walking around loose. There's a mystical major, somewhat on the saintly side, who will take his place with the most tiresome characters of the season.

The principal service rendered by "Sundown Beach" is that it places a swarm of new young people upon a Broadway stage, and there is considerable talent in the Actors' Studio company. I wish these players had sturdier material.

Phyllis Thaxter, an excellent actress, gives a fine performance as a spirited WAC who takes over the job of redeeming an Air Force captain, a role well played by Warren Stevens. Miss Thaxter has a genuinely moving scene near the final curtain. There are good performances from Cloris Leachman, Julie Harris, Anne Hegira and Lenka Peterson.

But "Sundown Beach" is a straining and labored play, and one with too many stories going on all at once.

New York Post

SEPTEMBER 8, 1948

The Season Opens Mildly With 'Sundown Beach'

By RICHARD WATTS JR.

The new drama season began in a less encouraging manner than the optimists had hoped for at the Belasco Theatre last night, with the presentation of "Sundown Beach," Bessie Breuer's earnest play about some psychiatric cases among the fliers of the late war. With the brilliant Elia Kazan directing it, a great deal had been expected of this first production of the new group knowns as the Actors Studio, but, with all respect for the heartfelt intentions of this serious study of the bitter aftermath of battle, it must be said that the new work is a clumsy and unsatisfactory one.

In fact, it seems likely that the Actors Studio selected Miss Breuer's play for production rather for the number of effective acting parts that its excellent players could get their teeth into than for its possible merits as drama. "Sundown Beach" has some interesting individual scenes in the episodic course of its narrative and there is an air of commendable endeavor about it, but it has little cumulative effect or power, a number of curiously ineffectual scenes, and a general atmosphere of dramatic futility. It is a better play than Maxwell Anderson's unfortunate "Truckline Cafe," but it resembles it.

Some Good Players

The one encouraging feature of the evening is not the emergence of any new writing talent of a noticeable degree but the gathering together of some excellent young actors who obviously take their work with high and thoughtful seriousness. There is, for example, Phyllis Thaxter, back from the movies, with an honest and skillful portrait of a young Wac anxious to get overseas but more eager to save a tormented ex-fighter pilot from his emotional crackup.

There is a handsome new actress named Cloris Leachman, playing with cool intelligence a wife unable to adjust herself to the changes the war has made in her husband.

There is Julie Harris giving a moving impersonation of a beaten Southern girl whose husband hates the child he knows is not his. There is a new actor named Warren Stevens being completely believable as an emotionally bruised young aviator who will not believe that his flying days are over. There is another newcomer named Don Hamner playing persuasively a flier suffering from a mother complex but convinced that he is a dashing fellow among the girls. In a smaller part blondely beautiful Lenka Peterson makes a great deal out of the uncomfortable role of a girl dreaming sentimentally of her unborn illegitimate baby. Here are players of both promise and fulfillment.

Central Theme

Although Miss Breuer's play is so episodic that it at times seems a kind of emotional vaudeville, it gives signs of having a central theme. The young men in the air-force hospital for convalescent combat crews, she says, are suffering from mental ailments that are less the result of the war than that they were merely brought into the open from their earlier lives by the emotional shock of combat. There is also a garrulous major, who is both an extreme mental case and the playwright's spokesman, and who talks about the need for love and the disasters that arise when man leaves the ground, which is his natural habitat, and takes to the air, which belongs to the birds.

The already mentioned comparison with "Truckline Cafe" comes from both the episodic fashion of the story, as it shifts to its various sets of characters, and its contemplation of the mental and emotional wreckage of war. But it also arises from the setting, which is a cafe near the hospital, where the inmates seem to roam at will, sometimes carrying firearms. In one way, it is a rather interesting sort of cafe. People seem to be able to order all the whiskey they want, but no one ever does anything about paying a check, or even asking for one. Somehow, it didn't seem realistic to me.

NEW YORK STAR

SEPTEMBER 9, 1948

There's Little Glow In 'Sundown Beach'

By JOHN LARDNER

The new theatrical season got tangled in the starting gate Tuesday night and all bets are temporarily off. This gives time for an idle thought or two, such as why, when a worthy, high-minded group like the Actors Studio makes its first stand on Broadway, does it almost invariably elect to do things the hard way? The best beginning, you'd suppose, would be to find a good, professional play and open business with that.

I guess the fact is that all these idealistic young dramatic tongs are suckers for the Alger tradition—it has to be up-from-nowhere or it doesn't count. Nowhere, or right around there, was where the Studio chose to begin its Broadway life Tuesday when it offered twenty-eight Ragged Richards at the Belasco in Bessie Breuer's play *Sundown Beach*.

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I don't say that *Sundown Beach* represents absolute squalor, but it is pretty well down in the playwriting scale. As a playwright—as the author of *Sundown Beach*, anyway—her technique is to take a bucket of mental case histories out there on the shooting range and throw them at the target by the handful. I saw no hits, but then, I didn't exactly see the target, either.

Also, Miss Breuer used a low grade of buckshot. The following lines are culled from her text at random. I quote loosely, but not as loosely as you might think:

"Women are creatures of the moon" (this has a physio-philosophical application which we will not dwell on here).

"You are so remote . . . I can't get through to you."

"I am a panther-like woman . . . I can't sit at the feet of a sweet sheep."

"There's snow in Vermont."

* * *

The last statement, ostensibly sound as a nut and probably worth betting on, is delivered by a good-looking blond girl who spends most of the first act necking, to put it mildly, with a tall guy on a bench (a good bench, by Ben Edwards, who created a good set in general). This couple constitutes a sort of Greek chorus, though it doesn't have much to say. It is the only part of the cast that holds still. The other twenty-six actors race on and off the stage at a fine rate of speed from start to finish. There would be no reason to object to this if they raced to any purpose.

It should be said without further delay that Miss Breuer's play is honestly and seriously meant, which makes it all the more unlucky that her writing is diffuse, shapeless, and, quite often, unconsciously funny. All three acts are set in a cafe and bar on an island off the west coast of Florida, where convalescent air force men come, from a nearby hospital, to drink, demonstrate their combat fatigue, and raise hell with the waitresses. The time is early 1945. In nearly all the flyers who appear on the stage, combat fatigue is advanced to the point of psychosis.

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I said before that Miss Breuer lays on her psychoses thick and fast—so much so that they are neither clearly detailed nor believable. There is a mother complex, a father complex laced liberally with a sissy, or non-virility, complex, a social inferiority complex, a religious complex, and a few light cases of paranoia and schizophrenia. The women in *Sundown Beach*, suffering from home-front troubles of one kind or another, are approximately as sick as the men.

Since combat fatigue in its various evolutions is no laughing matter, I think a good test of a play like this is to consider how a specially qualified audience, that is, an audience of GI's with overseas service, would react to it. My guess, from having watched a good many such audiences do their stuff at plays and pictures, is that they would laugh, and not in the right places. For that matter, Miss Breuer has provided practically no right places to laugh in.

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As it happens, the air force hospital in her play is situated in the neighborhood of a Florida divorce foundry. The consequence is that the wives in *Sundown Beach* are constantly sprinting onstage to notify their convalescent mates that they have just taken out, or have just torn up, the first papers in a divorce action. This plot device is not uncomical in practise, but I am pretty sure that Miss Breuer meant it to have different effect.

A high point in the play, for me, was when a young Southern wife won back her husband—halfway, at least—by reciting the bill of fare of the first meal she would give him when they got home. The part is played by Julie Harris. There was a good deal of Miss Julie Haydon in her work as she intoned the words "Collard greens . . . side meat . . . black-eyed peas" with a sweet, wistful, angelic expression and an upturned profile. The "black-eyed peas", especially, were like a chord on a heavenly harmonium.

For the most part, however, none of the players in *Sundown Beach* seemed truly comfortable at any time in the proceedings. Among them, the busiest are Steven Hill, Don Hamner, Anne Hegira, Edward Binns, Warren Stevens, Phyllis Thaxter, Joseph Fallon, John Sylvester, and Miss Harris.